THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF VEGANISM:
"MORAL BRANDING" IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

by

Peter Pawlak

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submitted by   Peter Pawlak   in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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Examining Committee:

Renisa Mawani, Sociology
Supervisor, Supervisory Committee Member

Thomas Kemple, Sociology
Supervisor, Supervisory Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersections between the recent rise of veganism into the mainstream and the continued gentrification of low-income and marginalized areas within the urban environment. More specifically, I examine the spatial dynamics of one particular vegan eatery in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, how it produces social distance between patrons and DTES residents, thereby reproducing hegemonic power relations, both symbolically and materially. Via ethnographic fieldwork, critical discourse analysis, and engagement with social theory, I highlight how the histories of classism, colonialism, racialization, and othering that the Downtown Eastside was built upon are symbolically reproduced and socially perpetuated via the built environment of the restaurant. Additionally, I examine the restaurant's usage of "moral branding" and the ways in which this style of branding produces narratives that justify the existence of the space while simultaneously actively erasing its connections to the poverty immediately outside its doors. Ultimately, moralistic vegan branding promotes a decontextualized, ahistorical, capitalistic version of veganism that does not take into account human suffering under industrial meat and dairy production and assumes veganism – in whatever forms it may take – to always be a positive and favorable ethical choice.

LAY SUMMARY

This paper addresses the intersection of the rising popularity of veganism and the continued

gentrification of low-income, urban spaces. Via an in-depth analysis of the spatial dynamics

of one specific vegan restaurant located in the midst of one of Canada's poorest

neighbourhoods, the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, this research explores the links

between veganism and the reproduction of existing social inequalities. I also explore the role

that moral vegan branding plays in the construction and reinforcement of simplistic

understandings of veganism that do not consider the plight of human beings under industrial

meat and dairy production. Considering the recent data available on the newfound popularity

of veganism and the highly contested nature of urban spaces such as the Downtown Eastside,

this paper contributes to an expanding range of literature that addresses the roles that

veganism, restaurants, and/or food play on the usage of space within urban environments.

PREFACE

The research for this paper was designed and carried out exclusively by the author. The author conducted ethnographic fieldwork and analysis, and supervisors provided light guidance. This research did not require ethics approval to be completed.

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Hence, of all the things that people have in common, the most common is that they must eat and drink…The sociological structure of the meal emerges, which links precisely the exclusive selfishness of eating with a frequency of being together, with a habit of being gathered together such as is seldom attainable on occasions of a higher and intellectual order. Persons who in no way share any special interest can gather together at the common meal – in this possibility, associated with the primitiveness and hence universal nature of material interest, there lies the immeasurable sociological significance of the meal.

– Georg Simmel, [1910] 1997, 130

Introduction: Setting the Scene

Within a two to three block radius of Vancouver's Main Street and East Hastings Street intersection there exists a remarkably varied scene of people, activity, and styles of consumption. Precisely the opposite of Simmel's description of the meal as unifying those who may otherwise have no reason to be spending time with one another, here there are stark contrasts in the material realities of differing people's lives on display, and the meal serves only to highlight this distance. Exploring this area in the spring and summer of 2018, I found a significant contrast between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' the likes of which cannot be found anywhere else in the city, and one that is marked by disparities in food consumption. Tucked in amongst the corner stores, emptied out storefronts, and single room occupancy hotels (SROs) that serve low income and impoverished residents of the area, newly opened restaurants and coffee shops with lavishly decorated interiors serve the more socio-economically privileged newcomers to the area. The deeply contrasting material realities of people found in this pocket of the city are startling in comparison to the relatively economically distinct neighbourhoods found throughout the rest of the city. Within this patchwork of various businesses and public spaces it is not uncommon to find a sidewalk scene of sharply-dressed young people bustling past elderly residents in Chinatown, a part of Vancouver that adjoins the Downtown Eastside, while

homeless folks in sleeping bags or blankets rest in the entries and along the walls of buildings.

Contemporary Vancouver – amidst a growing number of major cities in Western industrialized countries exhibiting similar patterns – can be characterized as a city with wealth disparities that are blatantly visible and on-display. A walk along Hastings Street from west to east takes one from an area awash in readily observable displays of wealth of the central business district to the poverty-stricken Downtown Eastside within minutes. Some have used the term 'dual city' to describe the manner in which contemporary cities host – in close proximity – both the benefactors of the 'digital economy' and neoliberalism and those completely shut out of this realm, two "separate worlds living right beside each other, occupying the same space but living in isolated realities" (Hern, 2010, 15). When examining Vancouver in this historical moment, we find that these repercussions of neoliberal policies and the unchecked stream of capital become immediately and unforgettably apparent. This reality shapes the built environment and material reality of the city and is an important consideration in examining the spatial politics of the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood – something I have set out to do here.

The two blocks along Vancouver's Pender Street between Carrall Street to the west and Main Street to the east are a condensed space that showcases the complexities of the present condition of the Downtown Eastside. This is a part of Vancouver's historic Chinatown district, but runs parallel to – and directly one block south of – the portion of Hastings Street that features the most vivid displays of poverty and drug addiction in the area. On this particular segment of Pender Street the streets are lined with older brick buildings adorned by large Chinese lettering. There are, however, a number of newer

looking businesses, most presenting the sort of clean-cut and minimalistic design popular amongst newly opened shops of all sorts in Vancouver. Amongst these businesses are a store with 'fancy' drink-making accessories called The Modern Bartender, an upscale-and-fashionable-presenting clothing store called El Kartel, a minimally-decorated coffee and sandwich shop called Say Hey Café, and the new music and event venue Fortune Sound Club. Located right within the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is another new business, a vegan pizza restaurant, which will be the primary focus of this paper.

For the most part, these businesses do not seem to be flaunting their difference from the surrounding Chinatown neighbourhood but rather, appear to be trying to fit into the fabric of the existing street. Indeed, simply looking down the street a person would not necessarily find it easy to spot these businesses; one has to walk past each one, taking a deliberate look inside to determine what exactly goes on in each. According to a report by the Carnegie Community Action Project, however, these businesses really function as "zones of exclusion" that are priced beyond what longtime local residents on fixed incomes can afford, including many of the elderly residents of Chinatown or the 13,000 people on social assistance of the Downtown Eastside. Instead, these businesses cater to wealthier newcomers (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2017). Longtime residents of the Downtown Eastside – many impoverished and/or homeless – have little to no use for these inaccessible spaces that aim to attract higher income patrons.

Here amongst this contemporary display of wealth disparity we find that the commonality associated with the meal of which Simmel speaks – the shared reality that we must all, as human beings, eat and drink – does not bring together or unify those of

varying backgrounds and histories. Rather, in its place, we often find one of the main functions of food and beverage in the Downtown Eastside is to separate and exclude. Amidst an area of Vancouver long understood as the most marginalized and destitute in the city (and perhaps, all of Canada) changes in the composition of the neighbourhood lead to changes in the material and spatial realities of the community members that make up this space and are representative of wider trends that can be seen taking place throughout various large Canadian and American cities (Blomley, 2003). The sociological significance of the meal within the context of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside then, is that one of its main functions is to create a barrier between the benefactors of neoliberal capitalism and those less socioeconomically fortunate.

The Spatial Politics of Veganism

Veganism as a phenomenon has exploded in popularity in the global West in the last few years and is another primary focus of this paper. This surge in popularity can be seen in various developments including the recent publication of an article titled "The Unstoppable Rise of Veganism: How a Fringe Movement Went Mainstream" in *The Guardian* or the opening of a number of new vegan restaurants in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale that has lead to the controversial rebranding of the neighbourhood as 'Vegandale' by some. This rise in popularity is also backed by newly available data on human consumption trends, such as recently released USDA statistics that indicate that in 2014, 400 million fewer animals were slaughtered in the U.S. than in 2007, despite a growth in population (Mercy for Animals). One study from 2017 even claims that veganism has exploded in popularity to the point that 6% of adult Americans are now vegan, up from a mere 1% in 2014 (ReportBuyer, 2017). In Canada, British Columbia boasts the highest percentage of vegans in the entire country, including almost ten percent of people aged thirty-five and under (*Vancouver Sun*, 2018). Clearly, some people within Western, industrialized capitalist contexts are rethinking their understandings about what constitutes food, particularly around the consumption (or lack thereof) of meat. These developments raise a series of interesting questions about the relationships between what and how humans eat and the politics of vegan consumption.

Rather than considering questions of individual choice in regards to the consumption of food, as some researchers have done, I examine the spatial politics of veganism. In contrast to the study of veganism as an ethical, environmental, or health-based personal choice, I explore the rising phenomenon of veganism in relation to the

wider, structural dynamics concerning poverty and struggles over space in urban environments, especially within Vancouver. In this paper I consider the ways in which food (in its many forms), people, and the physical spaces of the urban environment where food is processed and consumed, interact and shape each other. I focus on the ways in which food, restaurants, and veganism are all interconnected in the continued oppression of marginalized groups and in the gentrification of low-income neighborhoods. Finally, I examine the role that space – in both virtual and physical forms – plays in the production of social distance and the reproduction of existing social dynamics.

In recent years scholars have examined the impact that the opening of new restaurants has on processes of gentrification occurring within Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighborhood (Hyde, 2014; Burnett, 2014). Following this existing research, my analysis hones in on one specific vegan restaurant located in this particular urban space: a small, "fast-casual" establishment that specializes in animal-product-free pizza and ice cream, among other food items. My analysis investigates various vectors of oppression through the medium of food in a particular eatery that finds itself located within one of Vancouver's most highly contested – both historically and presently – spatial settings.

Veganism: Stigmatized Lifestyle on the Rise?

Given this project's focus on veganism, a discussion of existing literature on this topic is warranted. Animals slaughtered each year for the sole purpose of feeding humans have reached an almost incomprehensible number in the global West, with over 9 billion animals (not even counting fish or other sea creatures) being slaughtered per year in the U.S. alone (The Humane Society of the United States, 2017). It is possible that this number may decrease significantly in the near future, as recent studies have shown that more and more people in Western industrialized countries, especially younger generations, are adopting vegetarian or vegan diets as these lifestyle choices enter the mainstream (Marinova and Raphaely, 2016). A recent Dalhousie University survey indicates that in British Columbia, over a third of people 35 years of age and under follow vegetarian or vegan diets (*Vancouver Sun*, 2018). According to the same survey, over 9 percent of people 35 and under in B.C. are vegan. It's fair to imagine that these numbers may be even higher within the city limits of Vancouver, the largest urban hub in the province, as well as the setting of this paper.

According to The U.K. Vegan Society, veganism is a lifestyle/dietary choice that "seeks to exclude, as far as possible and is practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose" (The Vegan Society, 1979). Some prominent scholars (Latour, 1991) have claimed that sociology as a discipline has generally ignored non-human animals as subjects of study – indeed, my own study perpetuates this trend, though I do so with the intention of shedding light on how a unilateral focus on non-human animals can obscure related social inequalities, which may be glossed over or altogether forgotten. One discussion of veganism summarizes all

forms of veganism (ethical, environmental, health-based) as essentially "a struggle against a dominant, and widely unquestioned, ideology called carnism, which 'rests upon the anthropocentric assumption that the killing of other animals for the human palate is ethical and legitimate'" (Hirschler, 2011, 167-168).

Studies focusing on demographic characteristics have largely come to similar conclusions, indicating that vegans generally tend to be well-educated, younger, have higher incomes, be further to the left politically, and more often than not identify as female (Sabate, et al., 2006; Alles, et al., 2017). People with a university degree are three times as likely as those with a high school diploma to be vegetarian or vegan (*Vancouver Sun*, 2018). This information matches the findings of past studies, which have found higher levels of formal education to be a significant indicator of vegetarianism (Sabate, et al., 2006). The Dalhousie University study previously mentioned also indicates that those earning higher incomes (specifically those earning $150,000 a year or more) are twice as likely as those earning less than $80,000 a year to consider themselves vegetarian or vegan, a finding that is backed by previous studies that indicate that vegetarians are more likely to be of a higher socioeconomic status and generally lead 'healthier' lifestyles than meat-eaters, however this may be defined (*Vancouver Sun*, 2018; Alles, et al., 2017).

Previously conducted studies on veganism have shown that those who are not vegans have generally negative perceptions of veganism and that vegans are often stigmatized as a result of their dietary and consumption lifestyle (Bresnahan, Zhuang, Zhu, 2016). Other studies have shown that non-vegan people perceive and associate veganism or those who choose a vegan diet with lower levels of masculinity as compared to the present norm of a "carnist" diet. Similar discourses of normative masculinity frame

animal rights as an effeminate endeavor not worthy of male attention (Thomas, 2016). Such masculine norms do seem to impact the demographic makeup of vegans: studies routinely show that vegans identifying as female significantly outnumber vegans who identify as male, oftentimes coming close to – or exceeding – double the number (The Vegan Society, 2016; *Dal News*, 2018). Additionally, feminist scholars have critiqued the Western philosophical tradition of promoting a hierarchical dualism of man versus animal that has succeeded in othering and devaluing non-human animals for centuries, from Plato to Descartes to the present (McCance, 2012). These are just a few of the factors that may play into why veganism has come to be seen as a marginal lifestyle, though, given recent data on the increased popularity of veganism, these mainstream perceptions may already be shifting in more positive directions.

Cole indicates that when academic discourses take on the topic of veganism (which in itself, is rather uncommon), they tend to posit veganism as a form of asceticism, a restrictive form of self-denial (Cole, 2008). Additionally, Cole and Morgan's examination of newspaper portrayals of veganism in the United Kingdom indicate that when veganism is discussed in the media it is more likely than not to be discredited, derided, or made to seem difficult, or even impossible to maintain (Cole and Morgan, 2011). The authors also find that these negative media depictions of vegans typify those who abstain from consuming animal products as being fad followers, overly sensitive, or hostile. These depictions depoliticize vegans and veganism by disconnecting vegan action from the goals of animal liberation (Cole and Morgan, 2011). Given the findings of existing research, it is not outlandish to suggest that the cultural norms of the industrialized, capitalistic West promote the devaluation of non-human animal life, a

stance that can be understood as generally antithetical to veganism. The discourses discussed above showcase how normative assumptions about dietary habits are embedded not only in academic research on veganism but in popular media depictions of veganism as well. Rather than highlighting how veganism enhances quality of life, such representations assume that by choosing not to eat or consume animal-based products, vegans are somehow denying themselves of something (meat consumption) that – as framed by these discourses – is assumed to be essential.

Considering this attitude, it should not come as a shock that, at least for now, vegans are still severely outnumbered by non-vegans. Indeed, people following vegan lifestyles remain relatively rare as a proportion of the general population. According to a 2015 poll, vegans or vegetarians together comprise 3.4% of the American population and a 2009 survey suggested that only around 1% of American adults are vegans (Bresnahan, Zhuang, Zhu, 2016; Hirschler, 2011). Interestingly enough, however, recent polling statistics demonstrate that while vegetarianism remains stable, veganism is growing in popularity amongst Americans, despite the prevalence of generally negative portrayals of veganism discussed above (Gallup, 2012). Indeed, as mentioned previously, the most recent information available indicates a massive growth in popularity of vegan lifestyles, potentially signaling a cultural shift in Western countries from the negative associations of veganism of the past to mainstream acceptance and further growth and promotion of this lifestyle (ReportBuyer, 2017). Clearly, such a shift will have important implications for the constantly shifting urban environment and recent conversations surrounding gentrification of low-income and marginalized neighborhoods.

The seemingly positive environmental impact of a vegan lifestyle, in tandem with the growing number of popular documentary films released in recent years that highlight the horrific treatment of animals in modern industrial factory farms ("Earthlings", "Cowspiracy", among others) may help in explaining the apparent shift in mainstream attitudes to veganism that appears to be occurring. A number of studies have been released that point to veganism as an environmentally friendly lifestyle choice, as research has confirmed that more greenhouse gas emissions are caused by animal agriculture than by transportation (Steinfeld, 2006). Given this information, it could be said that going vegan is a potentially more environmentally friendly individual consumption choice than giving up driving a car.

With the emphasis on the natural environment that is associated with veganism and vegan circles, however, there comes the risk of ignoring the urban environment where vegan eateries or stores end up taking root and utilizing space. Indeed, with the rhetoric surrounding personal choices aimed at "saving the planet" or generally being environmentally conscious – such as recycling, driving less, buying local products, etc. – there often comes a blindness to the lives and experiences of people in poverty who cannot make these types of choices, or the corporate practices that disproportionately pollute low-income communities of color (Turner, 2016).

Another potentially more plausible explanation for the rise of popularity of veganism has to do with its newfound mainstream popularity in the global West, a stark contrast to the longstanding perception of veganism as a fringe movement only followed by the most intense of animal rights activists, hippies, or punks (*The Guardian*, 2018). Given the immense power of social and cultural norms in shaping thought, the new

public image of a friendlier, "deradicalized" veganism that is more accessible to the everyday person can be understood as playing a significant role in the explosion of popularity and interest that veganism as a lifestyle has had in recent times.

Symbolism and Political Economy of the Meal

In addition to research on the phenomenon of veganism, more general works concerning the sociology of food have informed this research. O'Neill examines the "symbolic status of meat in the American economy" with reference to the North American, meat-based "totemic meal", which is representative of an industrial social order predicated upon the "American ideology of efficiency, control, value, quantity, profit and convenience" (O'Neill, 2004, 35). Ironically, as O'Neill discusses, the process of producing meat is actually incredibly inefficient, as it takes nearly sixteen pounds of grain per pound of beef – the quintessential symbolically masculine food (note the aforementioned disparity in number of male-identifying vegans vs. female-identifying vegans) (O'Neill, 2004). As O'Neill points out, it is significant that this inefficiency is not simply in regards to the amount of grain it takes to feed the animals that are ticketed for the slaughterhouse, but also in the adverse health impacts passed along to human consumers resulting from the usage of hormones and antibiotics that have become a naturalized part of modern, industrialized food production (O'Neill, 2004).

Despite the fact that meat is the primary fuel of the American body that – both symbolically and materially – produces "health, strength, youth, smiles, sex and satisfaction", it turns out that the industrially produced meat that nearly all Americans are consuming is in fact more representative of the failures and shortcomings of contemporary American life than anything else (O'Neill, 2004, 32). Industrially produced meat is tied to many of the largest problems facing Americans (and Canadians) today, from unhealthy and failing individual bodies, many of which do not have access to proper

healthcare, to the warming of the planet and the impending environmental catastrophe that has been linked to industrial animal agriculture.

An understanding of the political economy of contemporary industrial food production is also significant to contextualizing this project. Michael Pollan examines the rise of the agricultural dominance of the corn crop in the U.S., a process that now includes two massive corporations, ADM and Cargill ("the largest privately held corporation in the world"). Together these companies likely purchase about a third of all American corn and, unsurprisingly, exert "considerable influence over U.S. agricultural policies", acting as the "true beneficiaries of the 'farm' subsidies that keep the river of cheap corn flowing" (Pollan, 2006, 63). In his research Pollan traces the majority of cheap American corn production – approximately sixty percent – to American factory farms, where hundreds of millions of animals ticketed for the slaughterhouse subsist on corn products (as well as a constant stream of antibiotics) that they may or may not be biologically suited to consume (Pollan, 2006). Manning trails "the food chain back to Iraq" by examining the energy necessary to maintain America's roundabout food production methods and finds that, in the U.S., it takes thirty-five calories of fossil fuel to produce every calorie of beef, exposing a troubling inefficiency that has deadly ramifications in the United States' global political positioning, most specifically in regards to oil-rich countries (Manning, 2004, 37). Still others have discussed the "true cost" of animal products as being substantially higher than the artificially low prices we end up paying at the supermarket, as government subsidies, laws, and policies crafted in the interests of the meat, dairy, and egg industries act to maintain the wild profitability of these industries (Simon, 2013). Any sociological examination concerning food must

surely be framed in relation to the realities and consequences of industrial food

production in the present moment.

The Field: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

A number of significant and influential works exist that examine the historical and social configuration of the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown neighborhoods of Vancouver. In one such study, Anderson examines the history of racial classification in the Chinatown area of Vancouver, outlining how this landscape was formed and evolved under European hegemony (Anderson, 1991, 26). Rather than positing the development of Chinatowns in the West as a "natural connection between the Chinese and their immigrant experience" – as is often popularly imagined – Anderson argues that "landscapes are linked in circular relation to ideological formations, systems of power, and sets of social relations" and showcases how Vancouver's Chinatown has developed as a result of such complex processes (Anderson, 1991, 3, 28). The history of the Downtown Eastside/Chinatown area is one shaped by racialization, othering, and "the excesses of a solidly rooted cultural hegemony, fuelled by eugenist prophecies about the dilution of the white race" (Anderson, 1991, 128). In examining this zone of Vancouver in the contemporary moment, it is significant to understand how it came to be, and how these historical forces continue to manifest in the distribution and utilization of space up to the present.

Blomley's work has taken on the "political geographies of urban property" by focusing specifically on the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver in an exploration of the "meaning, moralities, and politics of property" (Blomley, 2004, xvii). Blomley outlines the processes of neoliberalization occurring within urban housing markets, pointing to the "elimination of rent controls, state withdrawal from housing provision, and the facilitation of speculative investment in inner-city sites" (Blomley,

2004, 31). These processes became popularized in the 1990s in cities around the world, combining the efforts of city government with private capital in a gentrification process that is often branded as "urban regeneration" (Blomley, 2004, 31). Such processes result in urban landscapes like the one on display in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where today there are many markers of a neighbourhood being transformed – or "regenerated" – by the seemingly unstoppable force of private capital.

In addition to Blomley's work, Kemple and Huey have completed research on surveillance and counter-surveillance, as well as analysis of "skid-row" neighborhoods, both of which take a specific focus on the Downtown Eastside neighborhood of Vancouver (Kemple & Huey, 2005; Huey & Kemple, 2007). Focusing on the research process itself, the authors outline how a consequence of "systematic disciplined observation" within 'derelict' spaces such as the Downtown Eastside can result in researchers themselves being interpreted as agents of surveillance, and hence may result in the researcher becoming the subject of counter-surveillance efforts (Kemple & Huey, 2005, 140). Furthermore, they outline the history of how Vancouver's most impoverished area earned its current name as the result of community activism that sought to affirm and legitimate the neighbourhood by renaming it as the Downtown Eastside, seeking to "[decouple] the site from the stigma that skid row invokes in the public mind", instead promoting an image of the area as an "old, working class neighbourhood" defined by "character and history" (Huey & Kemple, 2007, 2317; Burnett, 2014, 158). Indeed, this "re-branding" came as a response to the associations with "dubious morality, racial otherness, and masculine failure" that the neighbourhood came to symbolize in the era after WWII, when capital shifted westward to the emerging central business district,

leaving behind a working-class area of aging men on fixed incomes occupying affordable

residential hotels, former psychiatric patients, and the marginalized and racialized

Chinese-Canadian and Japanese-Canadian districts (Blomley, 2004, 33).

Recent works concerning food, restaurants, and gentrification in Vancouver's

Downtown Eastside have discussed these intersections in depth. Burnett examines the

commodification of poverty that occurs when new spaces open in the Downtown

Eastside, where the purported authenticity of the gritty, rough-around-the-edges part of

town is utilized as a form of social capital that makes a gentrifying business appealing,

providing an experience of "poverty tourism" for settlers and visitors alike unavailable in

other parts of the city (Burnett, 2014). Likewise, Hyde examines how foodies who seek

culinary authenticity and achieve status through omnivorous consumption are drawn to

the Downtown Eastside, where recent gentrification has resulted in the opening of

restaurants that attempt to deal with the criticism of gentrification by operating under

principles of feel good "ethical entrepreneurialism" which in fact do nothing to deal with

underlying issues of structural inequalities (Hyde, 2014).

When considering the land that we now know as Vancouver (including the

Downtown Eastside and Chinatown), we must also take a deeper historical look at these

areas as Indigenous spaces. The territory on which Vancouver has been constructed was,

for thousands of years, the home of the Coast Salish First Nations (Robertson & Culhane,

2005). In many ways, the history of Aboriginal peoples in the Lower Mainland of B.C.

has been actively erased for the benefit of the dominant society. Barman chronicles this

history as occurring in a process of unsettling land - opening space for the colonizer -

while giving the false impression of Vancouver as "indigenous friendly, even as it rid

itself of the real thing" (Barman, 2007). Despite this erasure, the Downtown Eastside has been and continues to be a space characterized by a visible First Nations presence. Of the approximately sixteen thousand people living in the Downtown Eastside neighborhood, around forty percent of this population is estimated to be Aboriginal (Roberston & Culhane, 2005).

As mentioned previously, the Downtown Eastside is one of, if not the, poorest neighborhood(s) in all of Canada. And as Robertson and Culhane note, "it is neither accident nor coincidence that a disproportionate number of people living in poverty in the Downtown Eastside are aboriginal" (Robertson & Culhane, 2005, 16). A long history of marginalization at the hands of the colonizer precedes the contemporary circumstances. Those most likely to suffer adverse health effects as a result of contemporary industrial food production processes are disproportionately members of low income and marginalized groups, in comparison to the overall population of cities like Vancouver, or the entirety of Canada as a whole. It is the poor and marginalized who are often inclined to consume cheap, ultra-processed, high-fructose corn syrup-laden foods rather than 'whole foods' such as fruits and vegetables as a result of their economic positioning (Pollan, 2006). In this way, there is a very real connection between Canada's colonial history of displacing Indigenous peoples from their lands and contemporary industrial food production processes that have such damaging repercussions for the health and wellbeing of economically marginalized peoples – a connection that is especially pronounced in the Downtown Eastside.

Situating Myself in the Field

This project uses ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation) and critical discourse analysis. Detailed field notes are the result of approximately 40 hours of time spent conducting fieldwork that included walking through the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown neighborhoods of Vancouver, as well as observing the activity both inside and outside the restaurant on numerous occasions, at various times of the day or night, and on weekends and weekdays alike between May and July of 2018. I took all four of the self-guided walking tours of the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown neighbourhoods offered by the UBC Learning Exchange (a storefront community service offered by my university in the area) and took detailed field notes along the way.

Following Dorothy Smith's writings on 'institutional ethnography', my intention was to move "beyond the immediately observable" and investigate the entirety of the research process, considering the ways in which my own work operates as a "textually-mediated" procedure (Smith, 2014, 3). The field of study exists not just in the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown neighborhoods, but also in ways that extend into – and overlap with – the institution of the university. The University of British Columbia's presence is evident in the Downtown Eastside area, and with the recent opening of a second branch of the restaurant on the UBC Point Grey campus. I consider research materials, such as fieldnotes and menus from the restaurant as 'texts'. As Smith notes, "communication, action, and social relations" as parts of the research process are in a constant process of interaction with the omnipresent texts that one encounters and produces (Smith, 1990, 155). My presence as researcher and a participant had an impact on the behaviours and actions of those within the field of study. Likewise, various understandings and narratives

of the politics of the academy (and the researcher as an extension of it) also play a role in how others within the field approach and understand my presence. They also affect how my own understandings of the field are shaped by my experiences as a person who has been exposed to and immersed within these academic understandings and narratives for the past six years through my undergraduate and graduate training.

The method of critical discourse analysis has been utilized in my examination of source materials such as the website of the restaurant as well as other texts that represent, or are readily accessible within the restaurant. A critical discourse analysis allows for the examination of the embedded discursive meanings present within texts that may not be immediately apparent. Texts need not simply be written documents but may also take the form of words spoken and images displayed (Fairclough, 1995). This method allows for a critical questioning of the values and meanings inscribed within conversations taking place inside and outside the restaurant, the observable actions of peoples within and around the restaurants, the written materials about the restaurant, and so on. In other words, I examine the manner "in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged" within the context of the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown neighborhoods generally, and within the space of the restaurant specifically (Lazar, 2007, 142). In these ways, this paper has aimed to illuminate the underlying discourses and narratives that help to shape the meanings that define the spaces being examined.

It is significant that I expand on my understanding of the field here not exclusively as the Downtown Eastside area of Vancouver, but also as extending to the University of British Columbia and vice-versa. The University's presence in the

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Downtown Eastside – by way of the Learning Exchange, as well as by representatives of the University conducting research in the neighbourhood – must be considered. Additionally, the restaurant (which opened its first ever branch in the Chinatown/Downtown Eastside area of Vancouver) has brought the Downtown Eastside to UBC with the opening of a branch of the restaurant on campus. The opening of the campus branch immediately sparked discussions on the politics of consumption, as a UBC student wrote a short opinion piece published in the student newspaper, *The Ubyssey*, discussing the ethics of supporting a restaurant that, as the student argued, was a contributor to the gentrification of Chinatown, urging other students not to eat at the UBC branch, in order to "stand in solidarity with the low-income residents of Chinatown" (*The Ubyssey*, 2017). When considering the actual physical space of the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown areas of Vancouver, the manner in which this field of study shapes – and is shaped by – other, related spaces such as the UBC campus (approximately 12 kilometers away) must be taken into account.

As part of this project I had originally hoped to conduct interviews with patrons and employees of the restaurant. This approach was designed to gain a deeper sociological understanding of the restaurant in an attempt to follow Laura Nader's concept of "studying up", by focusing my research on those in powerful positions as opposed to those with less power (Nader, 1972). By addressing the "particularity of the local" that such interviews would offer me, my hope was to get a better understanding of the "[lurking] social forces of larger scale" reflected in the goings-on of the Virtuous Pie restaurant in the Chinatown/Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003, 151). My intention was to question whether the restaurant owners

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and patrons could be understood as having a responsibility to respond to concerns about their relationship to the low-income residents of the local neighbourhood.

I also planned to examine the ways in which this space serves as a reflection of wider patterns apparent in the U.S. and Canada today, in particular how neoliberal economic policy affects low-income urban spaces through gentrification of these spaces by restaurants that cater not to local residents but instead to a more privileged "foodie" crowd that visits the neighbourhood from elsewhere within (or even outside of) the city as patrons (Burnett, 2014; Hyde, 2014). My intention was to conduct 8 to 10 interviews with people having various levels of involvement within the restaurant, including workers at the restaurant, at least one person in a higher-level position, such as one of the owners or someone in a management position, and 5 to 7 patrons. However, I was unable to secure permission to conduct interviews from the restaurant as required by my university's Behavioral Research Ethics Board.

Since Dorothy Smith's suggests the researcher's "communication, action, and social relations" are a crucial part of the research process, I will describe in general terms how my attempts to gain a more intimate access to the restaurant failed (Smith, 1990). The university's research ethics board instructed me to receive permission to conduct interviews from the restaurant before proceeding, and so I reached out to the restaurant via email. I made my first contact with the restaurant on May 5th, 2018, informing them of my status as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia working on a thesis as part of my degree. I asked for their permission to conduct interviews with employees and patrons of the restaurant. I was met with a response almost immediately, informing me that "head office" would review my request. The person I spoke to also

suggested that I redirect my study to the UBC-based location of the restaurant, as it "may be more suited for you with you studying there".

After responding to this email and clarifying that the focus of my study would be on the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown areas of Vancouver, I heard nothing from the restaurant for a week. I then decided to try talking to someone in person. I visited the restaurant in Chinatown to try and speak with a manager and brought a copy of my request form to be signed. I spoke with the cashier and asked if I could speak with a manager. A young man arrived and pulled up the original email I sent to the restaurant on his computer (it was evident that he already knew about the initial email I had sent to the restaurant). He informed me that if it were up to him, he would approve my request, but that, unfortunately the only person who would be able to sign off on my request was the owner of the restaurant, who was in another city at the time, opening another branch of the restaurant there. When I asked him if there would be any way I could contact the owner directly he reiterated that the person who replied to my initial email had already passed on my information to the owner. He informed me that, essentially, all I can hope for is for the owner to respond to me. I thanked him for his time and left the restaurant.

Sixteen days after my initial email, and nine days after speaking with an employee inside the restaurant, I sent another email about the status of my request. Four days later I was told that my request had been forwarded to the "Head Office" again, but that 'the team' was in Los Angeles for an event called "Eat Drink Vegan". They also asked me for a list of potential interview questions, which I sent. After this I heard nothing for over two weeks. I sent another email, asking again about the status of my request. The next day I received an email letting me know that my request would not be approved. I

followed up by asking if I could receive the reasoning behind this rejection, to which the person in contact with me responded that they "are focusing on customer service and guest interaction during these times". It took forty-five days from the point I sent my initial request to the time I was informed my request would not be approved. As a result of these events, I was limited to conducting naturalistic observations as a paying customer of the restaurant – as allowed by BREB – and was not able to conduct interviews within the restaurant.

"Studying Up", Access & Related Challenges

As Smith argues, the researcher necessarily and unavoidably has an impact (real or imagined) on the field, and the research process in its entirety can be treated as a text to be interrogated and analyzed. Although I have no way of being certain, the negative outcome of my request *may* indicate that the restaurant was not keen on allowing me to conduct interviews with people related to the restaurant at all. As Laura Nader notes, "the powerful are out of reach… they don't want to be studied" (Nader, 1972, 302). When sociologists direct questions towards the rich, powerful, and privileged, they are often able to evade inquiries, camouflage themselves, or simply shut out researchers they would prefer not to answer to. Perhaps the restaurant had hoped that I would just give up and stop coming in or sending emails, or, in a less desirable scenario, that they would have to tell me to back off.

The fact that they did reject my request (after sharing my interview questions with them) suggests that there is something hidden from view, which the owner (or management) of the restaurant would prefer remain that way. In moving "beyond the immediately observable" aspects of my interactions with the restaurant and examining these interactions as a 'text' themselves, we might detect an underlying discomfort and awkwardness in the restaurant's way of 'dealing' with me – both in email and in person. This awkwardness may be placed in the context of the mounting critiques of the opening of spaces that are unaffordable and inaccessible to the residents of poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. As a result, those running the restaurant may sense an academic interest in the restaurant to be a threat. As Burnett points out, there is a growing trend of "poverty tourism" that seems to make eateries on the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown

fashionable or trendy, where the experience of seeing the "authenticity" of marginalized neighbourhoods where restaurants are located represents part of the appeal to consumers and patrons (Burnett, 2014, 164). Such critiques are not confined to academic journals or university classrooms, however, but have spilled over to mainstream media and wider discussions of the use of space in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, while major media outlets begin to cover veganism at a frenzied pace as it enters the mainstream. Assuming that those running the restaurant are aware of the existence of these critiques and conversations, they aim to keep their self-proclaimed reputation as an "active community member and loyal neighbor" in tact by not inviting outside investigators in.

My difficulties in obtaining permission to conduct interviews in the restaurant bring to light the serendipitous circumstances that are sometimes required for the successful execution of academic research. When information is blocked or withheld, research designs and methods must be adapted, and the information originally sought cannot be obtained. In my case, my inability to intimately access the restaurant, which was the original focus of my study by way of interviews with patrons and employees of the space, resulted in a different project than that which would have otherwise been completed. My current project now is more heavily focused on textual analysis and observational fieldwork. Unable to directly ask restaurant representatives about the restaurant's position in the community I am prevented from "studying up" to the degree that I had hoped to. In the popular imagination it may be perceived that academic research has reach and access beyond that of the general public. However, the reality remains that academic work cannot always penetrate 'the inaccessible' when walls are established by those in positions of power who may be reluctant or unwilling to be

subjected to the scrutiny of the researcher's gaze. "Studying up" is more difficult for those researchers attempting to ask the types of questions that Nader asks us to consider, questions which shift responsibility towards those in positions of power. Such an approach entails "[asking] 'common sense' questions in reverse", putting the spotlight on the rich or the powerful rather than those in poverty or the powerless (Nader, 1972, 289). Those in privileged positions are able to utilize their privilege to perpetuate the inaccessibility of information about themselves, their businesses, or their organizations, and thus take advantage of their power in such a manner so as to maintain it.

Drawing on Comaroff and Comaroff's discussion of the difficulty of the ethnographic process amidst the social and material conditions present in the contemporary 'occult economy' – one marked by the "corporate mastery of an epoch" of a neoliberal capitalism that gives an almost "messianic quality" to the free market – we must consider the obstacles pushing against ethnographic attempts at studying such processes (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003, 151). If 'studying up' was difficult in the early 70s, at the time that Nader first coined the concept, it may be ever more difficult in the present moment when the 'occult economy' – one marked by the expansion and promotion of neoliberal economic policies that has occurred throughout the global west since the 1970s – has been cultivated and expanded for four decades and counting. In what ways can we begin to attempt to ask questions concerning the powerful and the roles that they play in shaping the material, social, and spatial conditions present in contemporary urban spaces when they have made themselves more inaccessible than ever before?

In much the same way as extraordinary wealth is mysteriously created – for example, the neoliberalized 'occult economy' of which Comaroff and Comaroff speak, is one characterized by "the conjuring of wealth by inherently mysterious techniques" – in our present time, those in positions of power shroud themselves from investigative eyes by utilizing the same techniques of obfuscation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2003, 150). The benefactors of neoliberal policies are in a privileged position, able to shield themselves from scrutiny and detailed inquiries about the means through which their operations function and the impacts they may have on fellow community members. How can we as social researchers study up, by putting the spotlight of examination and interrogation on those in positions of power, when those with power prefer to remain in the shadows, out of sight and out of mind of the public? Addressing this challenge will necessarily involve a reimagining of research methods that address the conditions present in the contemporary 'occult economy'.

Inside/Outside: Opposing Realities

The restaurant is a relatively new all-vegan establishment featuring an inventive menu focused on single-serving pizzas (as well as vegan salads, non-dairy ice creams, etc) that opened shop in September 2016 (*Metronews Canada*). It is located on the street-level floor of a bright, clean, newly built residential tower located a block and a half south of a busy intersection that is the heart of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, a neighborhood that is known as the "skid row" of Vancouver since after World War II (Blomley, 2003; Huey & Kemple, 2007). As discussed earlier, this space is home to the most vulnerable and impoverished residents of the city, with over 13,000 of the approximately 18,000 residents of the area on social assistance, with many others earning minimum wage or no income at all (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2017).

Inside, the restaurant is small, but what it lacks in space it makes up with its lavish decor. As seen in Figure 1, the interior is elaborately decorated in sleek, modern furnishing, bright lighting, and features what appear to be marble countertops. It is also built around the space it occupies, as it runs longer than it is wide (from the perspective of the entrance), with a large concrete pillar present in the center of the space. Customers line up and order near the back of the restaurant (where large menus adorn the walls) and pick up their food near the entrance of the restaurant. Figure 1 indicates that from the perspective of the main – and only – entrance, the restaurant is split in two lengthwise, with seating and a single restroom occupying the left side of the restaurant and the employees-only food preparation area and large oven in view on the right side. The restaurant offers 12-inch single-serving pizzas ranging from $11 to $15 (based on the style of toppings that one chooses to order), a choice of one of two salads at $5 as a side

or $11 for a full serving, and single ice cream scoops at $5. These prices make the establishment one of many recently opened "zones of exclusion", defined as "spaces where people are unable to enter because they lack the necessary economic means for participation" (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2017). It should be noted that every single one of the 20 new businesses opened in the Downtown Eastside within a year of the summer of 2016 was marked as a zone of exclusion, while 31 spaces, many of which provided groceries, social spaces, or affordable meals for low-income residents, were closed down (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2017).

Figure 1
(Source: Restaurant Website)

In order to contextualize the inside/outside dynamic I analyze in this section, I will give a brief ethnographic description of the immediate area within which the restaurant is located. Just a short walk from the restaurant are a number of significant Downtown Eastside community spaces. A mere two blocks away is Insite, the first, and thus far only, legal supervised injection site in North America, which opened in

September 2003 as a response to the overdose and HIV infection epidemic of the 1990s (Kerr, et al., 2017). The Union Gospel Mission, a religious urban relief organization that has 7 locations throughout metro Vancouver, sits on the bottom floor of a newer-looking 6 story building on East Hastings Street.

Next door to the Union Gospel Mission is the Quest Food Exchange, which advertises its core values as follows: "reduce hunger with dignity, build community, foster sustainability". Just a couple of blocks away is Oppenheimer Park, where, on a dry day, there is a constant presence of a significant number (at least 100) of people strewn across the large park, which takes up a whole block. There are multiple tents in the park during the day, as well as people sleeping in the grass throughout the park. At night, even more tents are present, as clearly this is one of the many spaces in the area where homeless folks camp out overnight. Many of the people spending time in the park are in groups of three to six people, talking amongst one another. On one visit I witnessed a man walking through the park and pointing his middle finger back at an unidentifiable someone (or something). Moments later, as I walked past the park, someone across the street, on the south side of Cordova Street, yelled obscenities quite loudly, startling me in the process. The man, shirtless and quite young, was yelling at nobody, spending several minutes standing in the same spot, waving his arms and yelling to himself.

Nearby, at the Northeast corner of the intersection of Main and East Hastings, an emaciated man wearing a baggy sweatshirt and baggy pants yelled and waved his arms while someone nearby him urged him to relax. A woman crossing the street was talking to herself, quite loudly. There was an overwhelming amount of activity and people in this area – here, again, is the stark contrast in material and socioeconomic conditions between

people walking down the street wearing business suits, passing by those on the street who show signs of drug addiction (marks on their skin, frailty, stooped over, difficulty walking, etc.). A couple of blocks to the west, a very small and seemingly frail woman shuffled her way across the street, her face obscured by messy blonde hair, seeming to be under four feet tall, and with her bent over, contorted posture, she appeared even smaller than she already was. A sign on the door of the Downtown Eastside Women's Center on Columbia and Cordova warns about a recent increase in overdoses due to greater levels of fentanyl and gives advice about how to avoid an overdose (staggering doses, not mixing with other drugs and alcohol, always carrying naloxone). On nearly every single one of my visits into the Downtown Eastside/Chinatown area, an ambulance (or multiple ambulances, police cars, and fire trucks) would go blaring by at some point or another. Walking through the Downtown Eastside it is entirely common and even expected to find such visceral reminders of the poverty, drug addiction, and/or mental health issues that many of the residents of this area suffer from.

During my visits to the restaurant I observed a number of fairly stable patterns. Patrons were generally fashionably dressed and had what could be described as an aesthetically "up-to-date" appearance. This, as well as the popularity of the restaurant, as evidenced by its generally consistent state of busyness, remained for the most part constant, with even the least busy times still seeing a mostly packed house of customers. Every employee wore all black attire, which seemed to be part of a uniform dress code utilized by the restaurant. The physical appearance of both patrons and staff serve to reinforce the class dynamics already at play in this space. Though the prices at the restaurant already make the space inaccessible to low-income folks, the uniformity of

employee clothing and what could be called the "casual bourgeois" (not traditionally formal attire, but just as much a display of wealth by way of expensive, name-brand casual or sports wear – Lululemon yoga pants or The North Face rain jackets are common, for example) appearance of patrons makes it a symbolically inaccessible space for those who do not have the economic means or cultural background to dress in such a manner.

The built environment of the restaurant appears to attract customers based upon perceived status or prestige – the sharp, sleek interior speaks to middle- and upper-class sensibilities and the intricate and impressive menu seems to beckon those seeking a unique culinary experience. Specifically, the restaurant speaks "to the growing populism of the foodie scene in Vancouver", as described by Hyde, who addresses how processes of gentrification are related to a somewhat obsessive search for "authentic urban experiences" by middle and upper class purveyors of high status culture (Hyde, 2014, 342). The aesthetic choices made by the restaurant seem to send a message to potential patrons that this is a space of social exclusivity and elitism. These themes are again seen in the clean, all black uniformity of employee appearance, and are further amplified by the stylish and up-to-date appearance of customers, who perform their class position via their aesthetic choices in regards to attire.

The interior decoration and spatial design of the restaurant mimics a homogenous aesthetic theme that is featured at various new businesses that have opened in the Downtown Eastside area, and beyond. The design characteristics are marked by the dominance of the color white, the usage of wood, and sometimes the presence of plants and/or distinctive lighting in the form of artfully crafted light bulbs or fixtures (see

Figures 2 and 3). Furthermore, these spaces have a particularly clean and minimalistic

look and feel to them – amongst the businesses also utilizing this theme in the Downtown

Eastside and Chinatown area are Timbertrain Coffee, Matchstick Coffee, Propaganda

Coffee, Say Hey Café, Bestie (a hip new restaurant serving German food), and Pidgin (a

restaurant listed as the worst zone of exclusion by the CCAP Report). The "wood and

white" design aesthetic is not limited to this area of the city, or even just Vancouver, as it

is one that seems to have been popularized throughout various cities in North America as

a particular visual marker of gentrification, from San Francisco's Mission District to

Brooklyn's Williamsburg. Indeed, this homogenous, sterilized, Ikea-showroom-like

design style utilized by seemingly every new, pricey coffee shop or restaurant to emerge

in the last decade seems to be an indicator of precisely what sort of clientele is expected

to patronize these spaces – those with the class-based privilege to be able to afford to do

so. The presence of these spaces is significant in that it acts as a visual symbolic

representation for what a typical "zone of exclusion" looks like, sending a message to

those out on the streets as to what sorts of patrons "belong" inside – and who would be

better off staying out.

   Although the prices at the restaurant are low enough that it is a financially-

accessible restaurant for many Vancouverites, the particular aesthetic and design details

of the space nevertheless give it the feeling and appearance of an exclusive space that

caters to the sensibilities of the socioeconomically privileged or the culturally elite

"foodies" who seek the type of unique eating experience (vegan casual gourmet)

available at the restaurant (Hyde, 2014). Despite the fact that the restaurant's website

utilizes such descriptive catchphrases as "inclusive", "positive change" and "affordable"

(as seen in Figure 2), the feasibility of consuming vegan food for the low-income residents of the Downtown Eastside is almost unimaginable, as even if the prices of the restaurant are not enough to deter someone from entering, the constructed environment of the space may as well be a large sign on the front door reading "stay out" to those potential customers who do not display the outward appearance that conveys the high status associated with the "foodie" subculture. Indeed, in my time spent observing in and around the restaurant the only time I saw anyone enter the space who had a decidedly disheveled presentation was one woman who very timidly entered about three feet in from the front door, asked for a glass of water, and then promptly retreated back outside. The attitudes of longtime, low-income neighbourhood residents towards new businesses in the Downtown Eastside are reflected in the comments of one elderly Chinatown resident, who states "these places are really expensive and they don't sell things that we need, nor are they welcoming spaces for us… I never go into these places" (Carnegie Community Action Project, 2017, 11).
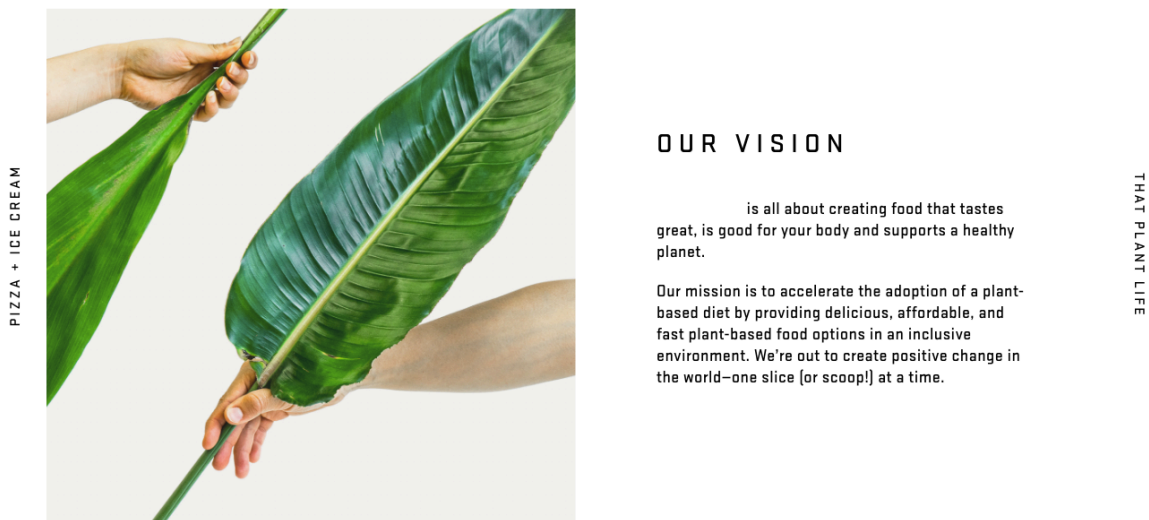

Figure 2
(Source: Restaurant Website)

There is a distinct separation between the symbolic and material realities of the interior of the restaurant and the exterior street; these are two different worlds. The spatial set-up of the restaurant requires a specific toolkit of taken-for-granted background knowledge and cultural understanding on how to navigate the space – similar to McIntosh's concept of the invisible knapsack of privilege (McIntosh, 1988). The small, densely packed layout of the restaurant – which requires patrons to walk all the way to the back of the restaurant to see the menu or order food and has little helpful signage to indicate the functions of space – can be confusing and disorienting to someone who is not used to the aforementioned minimalistic aesthetic design elements seen in many recently opened trendy restaurants and coffee shops. These features of the built environment serve to enforce who is and is not welcome within these spaces – ensuring a clientele that has the prerequisite class status and background knowledge to feel comfortable within such a setup. As Anderson describes in relation to the historical processes of exclusion that occurred in Vancouver's Chinatown area, this "othering" can be understood not necessarily as a result of "prejudice" against the other (in this case the lower-income members of the community who make up the majority of the population of the area) but rather as a reproduction of existing power structures (Anderson, 1991, 54). Though Anderson's focus is on the colonialist reproduction of European hegemony at the expense of Chinese immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Vancouver, there is a striking parallel in the contemporary gentrification of the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown. The spatial set up and aesthetic design choices of new restaurants such as this one serve to reproduce existing class dynamics by keeping the "other" out – though this may not necessarily be the result of any sort of outright nefarious prejudice against

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marginalized and/or low-income peoples, it nonetheless results in an exclusive space that invites higher income, mostly white customers and keeps out the marginalized "other" – not just via pricing, but via the actual built environment of the space.

There is also a pronounced voyeuristic element to the distinction between the interior and exterior dualism with respect to the window overlooking the street and its symbolic functions within the restaurant. Patrons of the restaurant can choose to sit along a small bar, directly in front of the main windows of the space, looking out onto the street outside. Seated at this window, one has a direct view of the activity happening on the street, so the patron looks on at passerby as they eat their meal, in effect "people watching" as a form of in-meal entertainment. During my visits to the restaurant, the function of the window in creating symbolic social distance between those on the inside and those on the outside was clear. As if to recall Foucault's panopticon, an element of power with respect to who gets to watch whom is evident from this arrangement, where those inside are free to watch the goings-on outside, whereas outsiders cannot examine or watch those inside the restaurant without breaching social and behavioral norms, as I noted above.

Not only are class-based distinctions spatially reproduced within the restaurant, but the spatial dynamics here also rely upon – and reproduce – the racial and colonial history of the Downtown Eastside. As scholars such as Anderson and Robertson/Culhane have discussed, the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown have been historically shaped – and continue to be influenced – by processes of racialization and colonialism. Just as the history of empire is marked by the utilization of technologies of cleanliness and "social purification" that are "inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and

class denigration", the inside/outside dynamic at play in the restaurant evinces similar patterns of racial and economic inequality (McClintock, 1995, 212). The interior of the space is marked by whiteness, minimalistic lines and design features, and, most importantly, a feeling of consistent, intensely controlled cleanliness – a sharp contrast to the outside, which prominently features trash on the street, dirt, grime, noise and chaos (i.e. the persistent roar of street traffic, ambulance, fire and police sirens, people outside yelling or playing music loudly). The symbolic value placed upon cleanliness within the imperial context – always positing whiteness as the clean, civilized referent and the marginalized "other" as dirty, heathen, that which can be purified only by being taken over and recreated in the image of the purportedly superior culture of the colonizer – is symbolically reproduced in the spatial context of the restaurant.

Insofar as whiteness need not be understood as an inherent, stable racial category but rather as a socially constructed, consistently in-flux concept (Roediger, 2005), we find that patrons of the restaurant – regardless of ethnic or racial background – can be said to perform a particular style of whiteness in this space. The brand of whiteness on display here is one associated with consumption, capitalism, and empire – participating in a morally "clean" meal within a sterilized, white-washed environment, from a detached, privileged position, where consumption is severed from its ties to colonial processes and can exist as simply an action on its own, decontextualized and without consequence. The whiteness performed by patrons here illustrates McClintock's concept of panoptical time; "progress consumed as a spectacle from a point of privileged invisibility" (McClintock, 1995, 214). To patronize the clean, white, minimal inside of the restaurant is to not only perform a particular style of whiteness, but to act as an agent in the propagation of the

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myth of imperial progress as well, where the dirty, dangerous, "uncivilized" area

immediately beyond the restaurant will soon be – due to the arrival and occupation of the

enlightened colonizer – transformed for the better, socially cleansed, and remade in the
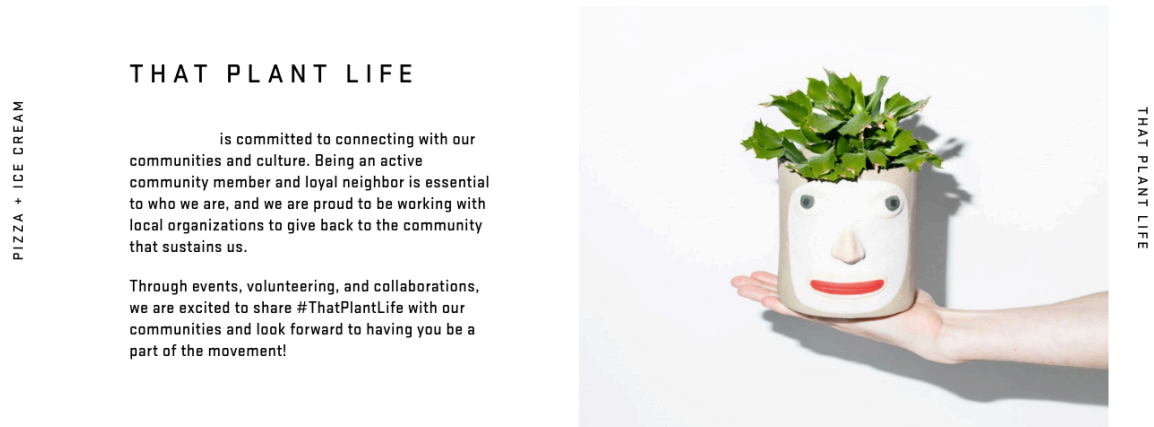
image of the newly arrived colonizer/gentrifier.

Figure 3
(Source: Restaurant Website)

In analyzing the spatial dynamics of the restaurant, Figures 2 and 3 offer a view

into how virtual spaces and the electronic virtual texts that frame and coordinate these

spaces are utilized to reinforce and even play up the manner in which actual physical

space is used within the restaurant. These screenshots from the website of the restaurant

display the same clean, minimalistic design features on display at the restaurant, this time

with light-skinned hands and arms interacting with or holding plants, with an entirely

white, well-lit background – these images seem specifically tailored to invoke feelings of

holiness, purity, and perhaps even virtuousness. Along with these images, there is text

that promotes – and hence justifies the existence of – the restaurant, highlighting the

supposed positive impacts it has on three different levels: for the individual consumer

("good for your body", "you be a part of the movement"), for the community ("give back to the community", "inclusive environment"), and for the planet ("supports a healthy planet", "positive change in the world"). There is also an emphasis on veganism, but without specifically using the word, that is expressed in the slogan for the restaurant ("that plant life") and its mission to "accelerate the adoption of a plant-based diet". The plants used in the images – not actual vegetables or even anything edible at all – represent veganism and reinforce the idea of participating in the restaurant's particular style of veganism as a clean, green, and healthy option. In Dorothy Smith's terms, these texts mediate relations of ruling by providing a legitimization and justification for the existence of this restaurant within the contested space of the Downtown Eastside, without actually specifically mentioning or acknowledging the restaurant as having presence within a contested space in the first place.

These texts serve to decontextualize the inside of the restaurant from its immediate outside surroundings and to project an image of the restaurant as a morally sound choice for the consumer by utilizing feel-good marketing and language that addresses individual, communal, and planetary points of concern for potential patrons. These texts and images act as an extension into virtual space of the restaurant, justifying and reinforcing the moral and monetary value its presence has in actual, physical space, while positing it as a space devoid of any connections to its immediate surroundings, lending no insight into the history or backstory of the neighbourhood it occupies. The reality of the world immediately beyond the walls of the restaurant presents a direct contrast to the narrative that is presented within these texts. The real-life sensory experience of walking through the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver is characterized by

visceral reminders of poverty, the direct opposite of the feelings of an almost holy purity that the text invokes with the usage of clean, striking design, the prominence of the color white, and moral branding that assures potential consumers that eating food within this space is the right decision for all.

In examining the ways in which the space of the restaurant reproduces existing social conditions and produces new forms of social distance, it is useful to consider the power dynamics involved. I mean here to draw on Foucault's conception of power as not merely an agent of repression, but as a "productive network" that forms knowledge and produces discourse (Foucault, 1980, 119). In the preceding discussion I have attempted to show the manner in which the spatial dynamics of the restaurant act not simply to make this an exclusionary space, but also to produce narratives of power and forms of knowledge about the restaurant and its position – or lack thereof – relative to its outside surroundings.

The symbolically and materially produced social distance that separates those inside the restaurant and those outside of it should draw our attention to the role that space has in shaping perceptions of reality. Bauman discusses how the "commitment to immoral acts… becomes easier with every inch of social distance" (Bauman, 1989, 192). Despite the extremely close physical proximity of human beings within and outside the space of the restaurant, there is a social separation and division of the inside/outside that is maintained by the manner in which this space functions. This social distance depends upon blurring the lines between action and consequence; that is, upon concealing any direct relationship between the gentrification of low-income areas and the continued oppression of marginalized peoples under the "rational" systems of modernity that create

the very conditions of possibility that allow for the influx of capital to "revitalize" such "run-down" areas in the first place. Indeed, by eliminating from sight the consequences that the existence of this establishment (amongst other restaurants occupying the Downtown Eastside) has on marginalized peoples in the community, patrons can enjoy a purportedly moral vegan meal. This is, they can help make a "healthy planet", a "positive change in the world", or be an "active community member" (Figures 2 and 3) without actually realizing the repercussions that the existence of this space has on marginalized community members.

To be clear, I do not mean in this analysis to portray a simplistic dualistic understanding of good vs. evil wherein the restaurant and its patrons are ethically corrupt agents of oppression. Instead, following Butler, I aim to consider the underlying social conditions that give rise to the way subjects come to understand their actions – "to rethink the relation between conditions and acts" – and to consider how the uneven power dynamics at play between those inside/outside are shaped by differing conceptions of reality that are enforced by the previously discussed spatial dynamics of the restaurant (Butler, 2004, 16). A large part of what constitutes a "moral" eating experience at the restaurant is contingent upon a narrative that renders invisible the impacts the space has on the area of Vancouver that it occupies. Though this narrative lacks complexity and does not consider the plight of low-income peoples on the Downtown Eastside, it can become a dominant and believable one in the minds of patrons by way of the social distance that is both created and reinforced within the built environment and the symbolic inside/outside duality I have noted above. Uneven power dynamics and social conditions between insiders and outsiders allow this particular version of "ethical consumption" to

ring true for 'insiders', as the experience and reality of 'outsiders' is erased and rendered non-existent within the narrative.

Concluding Thoughts

Some scholars (Burnett, 2014; Hyde, 2014) have posited that the on-display poverty discussed earlier is a feature of the neighbourhood that is actually a significant part of what makes it appealing to wealthier newcomers or visitors. As Burnett notes, "privileging the desires of affluent consumers for authentic encounters relies upon a marginalized population that can be exploited not only for their labor, but also for their value to the encounters that define the essence of tourism" (Burnett, 2014, 164). Maintaining the status quo of poverty of residents of the Downtown Eastside is in fact a key component of preserving the appeal of the "authentic" experience of coming to the Downtown Eastside as a wealthier outsider, be that as a temporary visitor or as a new resident occupying one of the recently built towers going up in Chinatown. For a space that employs a distinctly symbolically moralistic branding style, as well as claims of "being an active community member and loyal neighbor" (see Figure 3), the restaurant is in fact (whether by intention or not) benefitting from the commodification of poverty that has occurred with the gentrification of the Downtown Eastside. The contrast between the clean, light-colored, well-lit interior of the restaurant and the brutal reality of on-display poverty in the neighbourhood outside is striking. The chic design features (Figure 1) and branding (Figure 2, Figure 3) of the restaurant contrast with the disarray and suffering found on the streets immediately outside. At times, these two worlds collide, such as on the occasion when I saw a young, emaciated woman lying on the ground nearby the entrance to the restaurant, moving her legs in a bicycle motion and generally behaving strangely. Around twenty minutes later, an employee of the restaurant stepped outside, looked over to where the woman was sitting, and used her phone to call someone. She

remained on the phone for a few minutes, and took another look outside, again looking

over towards the woman on the sidewalk. Whether or not she was on the phone with the

police is unknown, but in any case, it was clear that this employee was making an effort

to "deal" with the woman's presence in the space immediately outside the restaurant.

These uncomfortable encounters between impoverished and/or addicted Downtown

Eastsiders and zones of exclusion are momentary breaches of the social distance that has

been created and reinforced via the symbolic and spatial arrangements of these spaces

and must be quickly "dealt with" in order to maintain the illusion of separation that exists

between these two worlds.

As veganism enters the mainstream, a side effect may be that the progressive

political inclinations which have been an integral part of the movement in the past may

go by the wayside, as veganism becomes co-opted as yet another appendage of neoliberal

profiteering. The combination of foodie-ism with veganism, as seen with the restaurant,

is a direct result of this, as the nuances of a comprehensive take on veganism – one that

considers, for example, the manner in which human beings suffer within the context of

neoliberal capitalistic policies and industrial food production – are glossed over in favor

of a simplistic understanding of veganism as a universally moral choice, regardless of

context. This format of veganism assumes a teleological, linear model of veganism,

where the sheer number of vegan restaurants in operation or number of people living

vegan lifestyles is considered progress. Although the recent explosion of popularity of

veganism is surely a victory for vegans and vegan groups, this is only one metric of

success. A veganism that assumes a universal, decontextualized experience amongst

vastly varying groups of human beings, and relies on classist and moralistic judgments is

not a sustainable, nor is it an inclusive strategy for the future of animal rights efforts. Disregarding the lived experiences and material/spatial realities of marginalized peoples by appealing to a more privileged class of largely white and economically stable "foodies" with morally judgmental branding and imagery, does nothing more than risk reducing veganism to an ugly elitist dietary trend.

The moralistic vegan branding that the restaurant adopts is by no means limited to just this space. Recently opened vegan restaurants within the same concentrated area of Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood have also made use of moralistic branding, some doing so much more brazenly – the Vegandale Brewery offers a beer named the "Morally Superior IPA" and the slogan for the brewery is actually "Morality on Tap" (*CBC*, 2018) (*The Toronto Star*, 2018). Furthermore, these newly opened vegan businesses – all owned and operated by a company called The 5700 Inc. – have taken to referring to the neighbourhood as Vegandale rather than Parkdale, prompting community members to protest by calling attention to the self-righteousness of this branding strategy and calling it "arrogant, abrasive, and divisive" (*CBC*, 2018). Vincent Hellenic De Paul, owner of The 5700 Inc. and self-proclaimed "vegan extremist" has responded by pledging $100,000 towards community programs over the next six years (*The Toronto Star*, 2018). However generous this gesture may be, it obscures the fact that the continued utilization of moralistic branding for vegan restaurants that participate in the gentrification of neighbourhoods is ultimately counterproductive to their purported goals of animal liberation.

With the entrance of veganism into the mainstream we now have the emergence of opportunistic capitalists exploiting a trending market, offering a veganism that, like

capitalism more generally, pays no mind to the inequalities or injustices faced by marginalized peoples and exacerbates exploitative conditions that are already in place. Capitalistic veganism is a response to growing popular interest in veganism and demand for vegan products, but may ultimately only succeed in depoliticizing veganism and distorting how interrelated the plight of impoverished, marginalized peoples and the negative repercussions of industrial animal agriculture are. Furthermore, restaurants and spaces flaunting a supposedly higher moral character on the grounds of veganism in the face of non-vegans – many of whom can hardly afford to eat at these spaces – creates even greater social distance than that which is already in place, further reinforcing existing notions (Cole and Morgan, 2011) of veganism as an inaccessible, unrealistic, and privileged lifestyle.

In this paper I have attempted to analyze the spatial dynamics of veganism in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood through the vessel of one specific vegan restaurant located within this urban environment. I have utilized a combination of ethnographic work, critical discourse analysis, and social theory to display the ways in which hegemonic power relations are reproduced – symbolically and materially – within this space. I have explored the stark contrast in realities between the inside/outside of the restaurant, highlighting the ways in which the histories of colonialism, racialization, and othering that the Downtown Eastside was built upon are symbolically reproduced and socially perpetuated via the built environment of the restaurant. I have also examined the spatial (both virtual and physical) and symbolic components of what makes this restaurant a "zone of exclusion" for low-income peoples. Related to the ways in which the restaurant functions as an exclusive and classist space, I have explored the

restaurant's usage of "moralistic branding" and how the narratives associated with this branding ignore or actively erase the material realities of those outside the space. Due in part to the social distance that is created and reinforced by the built environment of the space, the restaurant can be positioned as a standalone, decontextualized space that simultaneously erases the connections it has to the poverty immediately outside its doors, whilst profiting from these very conditions.

From a personal, reflexive viewpoint, I wish to highlight that, as a person following a vegan lifestyle, my aim here was not to critique the phenomenon of veganism as a whole, or portray vegan movements in a negative light. My belief is that, by being critical of the ways in which vegan spaces utilize the urban environment, a more comprehensive, and ultimately more inclusive, understanding of veganism can emerge. If veganism continues to rise as a mainstream phenomenon, those interested in animal liberation efforts would be well served to remain critical of the ways in which capitalistic veganism actively works to eliminate the links between the ills of industrial food production and the continued suffering of low-income and racialized communities that are most disproportionately negatively impacted. There must be a shift in narrative away from notions of veganism as an essentialist category that always represents an ethical consumption choice in favor of a more nuanced understanding of the different ways of 'doing veganism' and the political, economic, and symbolic contexts of the food that is being consumed. Elitist notions of an ahistorical, metaphysical 'morally superior meal' that rely upon the reproduction of colonial, racial and class-based inequalities are not only disingenuous, but also downright insolent and counterproductive to the aims of animal liberation. A reductionist, universalistic understanding of veganism that does not

consider the suffering of human beings under the policies and practices surrounding

industrial meat and dairy production is not an ultimately liberatory version of veganism.

We as human beings, after all, are animals too.

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